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A climber holds his arms up in a Y to signal to rescuers that he and his climbing partner, who had injured his foot, needed a rescue on May 22 from the base of Necromancer routes on Mt. Yamnuska.

Mike Koppang/Kananaskis Country photo

Helicopter Rescue Protocol By Rob Alexander

Rescuers in the Rocky Mountains are working to implement a helicopter rescue protocol in the hopes of making rescues faster and more efficient.

Rescue teams in both Banff National Park and Kananaskis Country have begun using a simple system hikers or climbers can use to indicate quickly and clearly if they are in trouble and in need of help.

Aaron Beardmore, a mountain safety program specialist with Banff National Park, said Monday (June 8) it is as simple as one arm up and one arm down for 'no' and two arms held up for 'yes'.

This system of communicating with rescuers in a helicopter is widely used in Europe, he said.

But in Canada, and the Rocky mountains specifically, rescuers have been forced to interpret hand signals that have often led to a misunderstanding.

“On a number of occasions, we interpreted the signals as (the victim) being fine and we flew away and then got called back the next day. In order to alleviate that confusion, we did a bit of research and we found that Europe was using that signaling system and it seemed simple to us and it seemed like people would understand it quite easily and we wanted to get that message out there,” Beardmore said Monday (June 8).

The other challenge can be simply finding someone who is injured or stuck, especially on a popular route or hike filled with people during summer.

“Think of a place like Heart Ridge,” Koppang said Tuesday (June 9). “You’ve seen that parking lot in the heat of summer, there could be 70 cars there. If you put two people in each car and they’re going up the ridge, you’re looking at over 70 people on the ridgeline and if one of them gets hurt, you can spend a lot more time searching with the helicopter.

“And if you’re dealing with failing light and poor conditions you may not find the person you’re looking for,” Koppang said.

Beardmore said that exact scenario occurred last summer on Mount Temple near Lake Louise, when a Parks rescue team responded to a call from a woman with a broken leg.

“There were people scattered from the top of the mountain all the way down to Sentinel Pass and we had to try and discern which people needed help.

“The signaling system helps us streamline it and make the rescue more efficient if people could signal ‘no that’s not me’, ‘no that’s not me’ and finally we have a ‘yes, that’s me’.

“We don’t have to try and hover in front of 50 different people to try and figure out who it is,” Beardmore said.

So far this season, both Beardmore and one of his counterparts in K-Country, Mike Koppang, with the Kananaskis Country public safety program, have been able to use the protocol to good effect.

Koppang said provincial park staff used the protocol on May 17 and again on May 22. Both times, people with the injured person were instructed by Kananaskis Country dispatch to use the protocol when the helicopter approached.

“A dispatcher at Kananaskis Country was able to tell them when you see the helicopter, stand, position your body in a Y, do not wave your arms and just stand still and face the helicopter and let them know you are the party in trouble,” Koppang said.

As a result, Koppang said they were able to reach and help a hiker suffering a heart attack on a ridge near Heart Mountain and a climber at the base of a climb on Mt. Yamnuska with an injured foot, faster and more efficiently.

More recently, Parks Canada received a call from a hiker who reported cries for help coming from a climbing route on Castle Mountain.

Beardmore and other rescuers flew to Castle Mountain and found two teams of climbers. They held out a sign that asked if the climbers needed help and to respond by using the protocol.

After the climbers signaled ‘no’, the helicopter flew further up the mountain, encountering a second group of climbers who turned out to be from Europe and were familiar with the protocol.

“Before we even had the chance to flash the sign they performed the signal to indicate they were okay,” he said.

“(That was a) good example for us, nobody needed help in the end and the signal is working,” he said.

Dispatchers from both Parks Canada and Kananaskis Country now inform people who call in for a rescuer to use the protocol when the helicopter approaches.

Beardmore and Koppang ask climbers and hikers to learn the protocol and to be prepared to use it if approached by a helicopter.

Also, Beardmore said he recommends backcountry users to be proactive and be prepared before they leave by carrying enough food, water and clothing.



Helicopter rescue protocol sign
Courtesy Parks Canada